

# Fightback

*Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism*

ISSUE 37



TRADE UNIONS  
FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY



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# EDITORIAL

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“The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves” – this phrase has been a touchstone for the radical Left since it opened the Rules of the First International, 150 years ago. And yet, easier said than done.

Trade unions are the most basic form of working-class self-organisation, and thus the embryonic form of the kind of consciousness and organization that the working class will need to conquer and rebuild the world. But it’s hard to see a straight line between this utopian vision and the unions that we know, belong to or work for in the here and now.

The necessities of mere survival through the vicious attacks of the neoliberal area have left only the strongest unions standing in the Western countries – “strongest” in the sense of the largest, after several rounds of mergers, and in the sense of being “professionalized”. Many newer unions such as UNITE in Aotearoa/New Zealand trumpet their return to an “organizing” model rather than a “service” model – thus bringing the threat of worker militancy back onto the scene after the long series defeats and “partnership” with the bosses which characterized the 1990s.

However, these new “organizing” unions are still firmly professional, in the sense that effective leadership and power remains with the full-time, well-educated and ideologically committed organizers, in addition to a small, self-selecting nucleus of “staunch” workers who are keen to carry out exemplary industrial actions rather than the traditional mass strike. Jane McAlevey’s *No Shortcuts*, reviewed in this issue, draws out this distinction very clearly in the US context.

The question is, of course, if “another unionism is possible” in the neoliberal, globalized era: what might it look like? Aside from McAlevey’s analysis, in this issue of *Fightback* we look at possibilities for organizing “difficult” groups of workers who are generally ignored by the “labour movement professionals” of the current era: freelance workers, migrant workers, hospitality workers. Each of these articles presents viewpoints from

organizers or workers intimately involved in these struggles.

We close this issue with an article from the “Women’s Strike” movement in Britain which brings up other crucial issues on what the unions of the future will look like. McAlevey’s book – as well as the book *Feminism for the 99%*, reviewed in our last issue – have discussed how strike action is a powerful tool for 21<sup>st</sup> century workers’ struggle in the caring industries (health, education, social welfare) precisely because these areas of work are so important to the neoliberal economy, and because they can’t be easily “off-shored”. The “Women’s Strike” article also neatly reprises themes we raised in our last issue on how modern socialist feminist requires uncompromising solidarity and common struggle with sex workers and trans and gender-queer people.

Thank you very much for supporting *Fightback* in 2019.

# FREELANCING ISN'T FREE: PRECARITY AND SELF-ORGANISATION IN THE “GIG ECONOMY”

By DAPHNE LAWLESS

Under capitalism, we're all supposed to dream of being “the boss” – as opposed to an exploited worker obeying the bosses' orders. Obviously we can't all be bosses – who would we order around and exploit? – but the next best thing, in modern “neoliberal” capitalism, is to be your *own* boss. Hence the appeal of those scam ads for “EARN BIG MONEY AT HOME”, which turns out to be selling cosmetics or bogus diet aids to your friends.

Capitalism is defined by the division between those who own *capital* – the tools, machines and resources – and those who have to *work* for a living for the owners of capital. “Self-employed” people are generally seen as being part of a “middle-class” between these two layers. In essence, they own just enough capital to make it possible to employ and exploit the labour of only one worker – themselves. The willingness of a self-employed person to “exploit their own labour” is one reason why small contractors are often more productive than waged or salaried workers – at a proportionate cost to their own health and personal lives.

The idea of self-employed people (often known as “freelancers”, especially when they are writers or other creative workers) as middle-class is an old-fashioned one. Increasingly, neoliberalism has made the idea of a full-time job, especially one “for life”, a thing of the past. Buzzwords like “downsizing” and “labour market flexibility” just boil down to more power for bosses to hire and fire, to drive down wages and conditions. In this situation, there is a whole new class of freelancers who can just be seen as *casualised workers who own their own tools*.

## Freedom is a two-edged sword

A freelancer is only paid for the job. There is no guarantee of future employment, no sick leave and no holiday pay. In these situations, freelancing can even be seen as a form of “disguised unemployment”. Often, having several “clients” rather than a single employer paying you offers no escape from exploitation and mismanagement; the website [clientsfromhell.com](http://clientsfromhell.com) provides a regular supply of hilarious, depressing and true stories of freelancers suffering at the hands of bigoted, fraudulent, miserly, or simply ignorant employers. Freelance journalist Jacob Silverman complains:

Every generation has its comeuppance. Ours lies in the vast field of disappointment that you land in after you run the gauntlet of privatized education, unpaid internships, and other markers of the prestige economy. There you find that writing ability or general intelligence mean nothing if you don't have the right connections, or the ability to flatter those in authority, or a father who once held the same job. Those who have mastered these forms of soft power succeed while the rest learn the meaning of “precariat” and debate joining the Democratic Socialists of America.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is another side of the story. Neo-liberal ideology talks about the “freedom” of the freelance, be-your-own-boss lifestyle. And it really is freedom, of a sort. A freelance worker sets their own hours of work; they can often work from home, which gives opportunities to parents of small families.

Crucially, a freelance worker also has control over the *conditions* of their work – when your client/boss is only paying you for *what* you produce, you can produce it in any way you see fit, without a manager hovering over you. And a freelancer

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/153744/gig-economy>



can also reject any job or any client which they consider repugnant, for whatever reason – if they can afford to. (The present author once rejected an opportunity to index the biography of a senior New Zealand politician – not for political reasons, but because the pay they were offering for it was negligible!)

But this is the same freedom that a stray cat has – the freedom to starve. The situation is even more dire in the United States, where the only affordable medical care for many workers is employer-provided health insurance. Being excluded from the “full-time” job market might mean a death sentence if you have needs which can’t be covered out of your own resources.

The author of this article became a freelancer when her employer went out of business; she simply purchased her work computer and kept doing the same job, often for the same international clients. I can testify to both the aspects of the equation above. The precarity and anxiety of sometimes not knowing where your next work (and pay) is coming from contrasts with other times when there is far too much work coming on tight deadlines and you have to choose between giving up a job and giving up your health. But all this is balanced by being able to work how I want, from where I want, producing work of which I can feel proud (that is, if I’m paid adequately to do so.) I can even just ditch work for the day to look after my preschool child, when necessary and deadlines permitting.

The freelance job-advertising website Upwork reports that

nearly half (46%) of Generation Z [those born after 1997] workers are freelancers, a number that is only projected to grow in the next five years ... not only are more Gen Zers freelancing, but 73% are doing so by choice rather than necessity, while only 66% of Baby Boomers and 64% of Millennials can say the same, according to the report.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly the British Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed reports that in the UK:

the number of female freelancers has grown by 55% since 2008. New mothers choosing to take up freelance work rather than return to full-time office employment post-baby has shot up by 79%. Comparatively, the number of men freelancing has grown by 36% in the same time frame.<sup>3</sup>

This new form of employment relationship is

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/growth-of-the-gig-economy-46-of-gen-z-workers-are-freelancers/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ceotodaymagazine.com/2018/07/the-rise-of-the-freelancer/>

thus dominated by younger people and by women, two of the most vulnerable sections of the working class. In these situations, the kneejerk reaction of the traditional workers’ movement that freelancing is just a way for employers to drive wages down, and should be discouraged or even abolished, looks as out as touch as those who say the same things about migrant workers. Many of us *choose* to freelance, and prefer the conditions of work to clocking in every day under a manager’s supervision. What we *don’t* like is the insecurity attached to it.

## Ideology and organisation

The point now should be not whether freelance work should exist, but how the position of freelance workers can be improved. And in the Marxist tradition, the answer to that has always been “the self-organisation of the workers themselves”. But the current labour union movement has enough trouble organizing workers on small, geographically dispersed sites. How can we possibly organize workers who work from home, online, with a different “boss” every week or maybe even multiple bosses on the same day?

Another major problem with organising freelancers is the strong influence of ruling-class ideas that freelancers should see themselves as “entrepreneurs” rather than workers – even when living in precarity at the whim of millionaire clients. According to Tom Cassauwers writing for *Equal Times* website:

Freelancers often see themselves as free-wheeling entrepreneurs, with little need for collective power or forming alliances with employees. On the other hand, some unions have a history of mistrusting freelancers, seeing them as a way for employers to undermine working conditions.

Freelancer Sarah Grey adds that corporate lobbyists invest a lot in trying to get freelancers to see law changes and union organisation which would actually benefit them as a threat to their “freedom”:

Aligning freelancers ideologically with the goals of the petit-bourgeoisie (which some Marxists also do...), even though most have far more in common with the working class, erects yet another barrier to prevent them from organizing and demanding rights as workers.<sup>4</sup>

This tactic was used to gruesome effect by Peter Jackson and Warner Brothers in the dispute

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/freelance-independent-contractor-union-precariat/>

around the filming of the *Hobbit* films in New Zealand in 2010. When Actors' Equity demanded a union contract, a slick PR operation by the employers whipped up fear that this would lead to the major studios abandoning film-making in New Zealand altogether. This led to film workers actually demonstrating *in favour* of law changes which deprived them of rights (one memorable sign said "EXPLOIT ME, PETER!") and union spokesperson Robyn Malcolm faced vicious harassment.<sup>5</sup>

Another crucial question is how to distinguish between actual freelance workers and "fake freelancers" – workers who are actually working in traditional jobs but have been pushed into declaring themselves to be freelance or "independent contractors" so that their employers can deprive them of rights. The most familiar example of this in Aotearoa is workers at Chorus who maintain our telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> Traditional unions or NGOs have to be careful to defend the rights of actual freelancers while also defending the rights of full-time workers to have all their appropriate rights and conditions of labour.<sup>7</sup>

## What kind of organisation?

Freelancer organization is currently most advanced in the United States, precisely because of the issue of health insurance mentioned above. The Freelancers' Union (<https://www.freelancer-union.org/>), founded in 2001 by former labour lawyer and union organizer Sara Horowitz, concentrates mostly on advocacy and getting good deals on health insurance from its members. Their biggest victory in advocacy came with New York City enacting a "Freelance Isn't Free" law, which requires that all freelancers be paid within 30 days alongside other legal protections.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Freelancers' Union is not actually a "union" in the way we would understand it, in that it does not engage in collective bargaining on behalf of its members. It is in fact more

similar a non-profit organisation which provides services and advocacy in return for membership fees; a "top-down" organisation, rather than an expression of workers' power. It works for freelancers "within the system" rather than trying to change that system.<sup>9</sup>

One major issue in the United States is that the labour laws left over from the Franklin Roosevelt "New Deal" era specifically exclude many categories of workers (originally to make the law acceptable to racist Southern agriculture bosses). Thus, many freelancers and other "gig economy" workers couldn't join a union if they wanted to. This is where NGO advocacy organisations play an important role, like the Freelancers' Union, or like the organisations who have lobbied for improved conditions for Uber and Lyft drivers – even organising successful strikes in Los Angeles.<sup>10</sup>

That said, there are successful models of union organisation among freelance industries – the most famous being unions in the entertainment industry (which existed before the US labour laws mentioned above). The US television industry was brought to a near-halt by the Writers' Guild of America strike of 2007-8<sup>11</sup>, and the same union is currently taking legal action against talent agencies who they say are exploiting their monopoly position against writers.<sup>12</sup>

The entertainment industry is one of the economic pillars of the US economy and – in that country, at least, can't be easily outsourced to more desperate overseas workers (the threat of which proved so effective in the defeat of the actors' unions in New Zealand during the *Hobbit* dispute). So it's perhaps not surprising that "old-style" union power still has a foothold there. But what models are available for those of us in less "trendy" freelance jobs – for example, writing or editing jobs, where there is continuous downward pressure on pay, deadlines, and the quality of work deemed acceptable?

One recent answer comes from a very venerable source – the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or "Wobblies") have recently started organising among freelance journalists. An article from a member-organizer

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<sup>5</sup> See our predecessor organisation's article at <https://fightback.org.nz/2010/10/25/workers-party-statement-on-the-hobbit-dispute/>, complete with comments from anti-union members of the entertainment industry

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/110473768/action-widens-against-chorus-subcontractors-accused-of-migrant-exploitation>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.equaltimes.org/unions-should-push-for-the-rights>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/07/for-freelancers-getting-stiffed-is-part-of-the-job-some-in-new-york-city-want-to-fix-it/>

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<sup>9</sup> A good account of the positive and negatives of the Freelancers' Union is provided here: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/freelancers-union/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/freelancers-want-to-join-unions-but-labor-laws-wont-let-them>

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007%E2%80%9308\\_Writers\\_Guild\\_of\\_America\\_strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007%E2%80%9308_Writers_Guild_of_America_strike)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/tv-writers-union-says-agents-are-violating-antitrust-law-2019-8/>



tells a story which is very familiar to freelancers in other industries:

Many new to the industry are expected to work “for exposure” (that is, for free or unliveable rates); writers covering sensitive topics are forced to shoulder the burden of legal liability and harassment from angry subjects and readers; health insurance is either a clusterfuck to obtain or simply out of reach. All of these problems follow the same dynamic: because freelancers are individually outgunned by the publications that they rely on for their livelihoods, they are forced to work under extremely exploitative conditions...

[S]taffs’ unions are only useful insofar as there are staffs; after being sold, [the website] *Mic* was relaunched without staffs — relying almost entirely on freelancers instead. If freelancers are not to be made de facto scabs, then they must be organized. And because staffs’ unions, bound by red tape and budgets, are not organizing freelancers, freelancers must organize themselves.<sup>13</sup>

The article goes on to discuss the question raised above, how to “map the workplace” (create ties between freelancers who might never meet each other in person) through one-on-one contacts through existing personal and professional networks. Crucially, the Wobbly organizers have worked on an international basis — just as feasible as local and national organising when the community is globalised through the Internet — and has made no distinctions between print journalists, website journalists or bloggers. They have already announced a small victory: a Twitter campaign forcing the website *Vox* to rescind their rule prohibiting freelance writers from publicly discussing how much *Vox* pays them.

Other, more “traditional” labour unions have also had victories. In the US, the National Writers Union won a major battle for back-pay for freelance journalists in 2018<sup>14</sup>. The Dutch trade union FNV, the German union ver.di and the British trade union Community have all made serious efforts to organize freelancers — the latter, similarly to the American NWU, aims to concentrate mainly on problems with late payments.<sup>15</sup>

Andrew Pakes of the British union Prospect toured New Zealand last year, giving talks on the question of organising freelance workers. In a website article, he explains:

Our approach is based on the premise of empowering freelancers (“what can freelancers do together for themselves?”) and our organising

strategy, communications and services are designed around supporting that.

We help freelance workers to organize themselves and treat the union as a source of experience, advice and administrative assistance — one that helps to create a sense of identity and pools knowledge to tackle shared concerns. This combines the best of union organising with new ways of working and extending our reach into growing gig areas, in the creative industries, communication and digital sectors. This approach is not without its challenges and adaptability is key.<sup>16</sup>

The question is clearly not whether organising freelance workers is possible, because it is being done. The question of whether traditional unionism, the “Wobbly shop” or an NGO advocacy-and-service model is the most effective is one which can only be established by experience. But time is long since due for freelance workers and their allies in Aotearoa/New Zealand to start making experiments.

Sarah Grey gives an excellent final word:

freelancers can no longer be written off as aligning ideologically with the petit-bourgeoisie. Freelancers increasingly come from working-class backgrounds, work for low wages, and share the primary interests — and the precarity — of the wider working class. We are not a precari-bourgeoisie — we are the future of class struggle.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://organizing.work/2019/08/a-year-of-organizing-freelance-journalists/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.equaltimes.org/unions-should-push-for-the-rights>

<sup>15</sup> <https://community-tu.org/who-we-help/freelancers-and-self-employed/>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://unions21.org.uk/news/lessons-for-a-collective-voice-in-a-freelance-world>

“WORKERS IN THE MOST VULNERABLE PART OF THE ECONOMY, THEY’RE BRAVE”:

# ORGANISATION OF MIGRANT FARM WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA AND AOTEAROA

By ANI WHITE. First published online November 2018.



It’s an open secret that the conditions faced by migrant farm workers in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are dire.

In Aotearoa, a study conducted by Sue Bradford for FIRST Union and the Union Network of Migrant Workers (UNEMIG), released on UNEMIG’s fifth anniversary in August 2017, found evidence of dire exploitation of Filipino migrants in the dairy farm industry. The study interviewed 27 Filipino workers, three local workers, and one dairy farm manager. Health and safety precautions were practically non-existent:

One farm worker said he wasn’t given a helmet to ride around on a motorbike and another said that for two years, he was made to ride a bike that

didn’t have lights or brakes.

Another respondent said he was not provided proper training or wet weather gear, and had to pay \$700 from his own pocket to buy one.<sup>1</sup>

This abuse is not limited to Filipino dairy workers. More than half of the Bay of Plenty’s kiwifruit employers audited in 2017 did not meet basic employment standards, as highlighted by FIRST Union when it launched its new Kiwifruit Workers Alliance.<sup>2</sup> Ni-Vanuatu workers in Marlborough’s

<sup>1</sup> [http://www2.nzherald.co.nz/the-country/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=16&objectid=11907236](http://www2.nzherald.co.nz/the-country/news/article.cfm?c_id=16&objectid=11907236)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.radionz.co.nz/news/business/357040/exploitation-of-kiwifruit-workers-is-rife-union>



vineyard sector approached Stuff anonymously with reports of underpayment.<sup>3</sup> Migrant worker abuse in Aotearoa extends throughout many industries, as found in a 2016 study interviewing more than 100 migrant workers, the first independent evidence-based study of its kind.<sup>4</sup>

In Australia, a *Four Corners* TV study into migrant farm work uncovered similar shocking conditions. Workers were paid as little as \$3.95 an hour, worked shifts as long as 22 hours, and reported performing sexual favours to extend their visas, among numerous other abuses.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, law-abiding farmers were priced out of the market. This shows that the brutality of the industry is not simply a matter of individual bad farmers, but compulsions of capital that must be resisted collectively.

Fortunately, FIRST Union in Aotearoa and the National Union Workers (NUW) in Australia have both taken up the organisation of migrant farm workers.

Mandeep Singh Bela, an organizer for FIRST Union and the coordinator of UNEMIG, says that working in isolated environments and having a lack of access to information about their rights is a major factor in migrant workers' abuse. "Being a migrant myself in this country since 2009, I worked in the kiwifruit industry, and I've been in a similar boat, where I was paid below minimum wage entitlements, I was exploited, didn't know where to go for help."

Bela moved on to work at Pak N Save, where FIRST is active, and became active in the union. To address the isolation and lack of information for migrant workers, FIRST and UNEMIG have now released a Migrant Workers' Rights Passport (MWRP), which contains information on employment rights for migrants, collective agreements, and legal and mental health support services. The booklet will act as a work guide and vital connection point for migrants so they can safely work in Aotearoa.

Tim Nelthorpe, a national organizer with Australia's NUW farm organising team, explains that the NUW has been organising in the horticulture

sector for three years (Nelthorpe adds that while FIRST has been organising in the sector for even less time, the NUW has been impressed with their work rapidly winning over "hearts and minds"). One major cue was when members of the NUW, previously employed by poultry suppliers, moved into horticulture and reported shocking conditions, asking the union to take this issue up.

"We're a supply chain union so we're the union for the warehouse," Nelthorpe explains. "The missing part of the supply chain should be in our union, and our members want those workers to be paid properly." Aotearoa's FIRST Union is similarly a supply-chain union with many members in supermarkets and warehouses.

Organisation at multiple points in the supply chain allows the NUW to place pressure at one point, for results at another point. Members who were worker-shareholders at Coles and Woolworths were able to place shareholder pressure in support of farm workers. "When they mess with our farm workers they mess with our supermarket workers as well," Nelthorpe adds.

Horticulture workers have also taken industrial action on a range of issues, often independently of the union. Nelthorpe explains how a recently recruited delegate was able to build a culture of strike actions around a health & safety issue:

Whenever those chemicals came in to be sprayed he walked into the middle of the packed shed and say 'right: OUT!' And the whole workforce would walk out. In a highly organized CFMEU [Australian construction workers' union] site that's probably not unusual, but in a new industry, it just shows you that it's inherent in people, they just need a supportive structure and they can do the rest.

Nelthorpe explains that the lawlessness of the industry can go both ways:

Think of it like the jungle. In the jungle where there's no laws, people take industrial action, and employers take industrial action too, so employers will sack all workers and cash contractors in a day, the employers will call Immigration on their own workforce, but at the same time, workers in the most vulnerable part of the economy, the undocumented workers, they're brave, they'll walk off a job, they'll do a go slow, they'll rock up to their contractor's house demanding money, because they have to.

Through militant action, NUW members have won a number of victories. Firstly, the NUW managed to smash cash contracting in South-East Melbourne and Northern Adelaide. Workers on some sites have made an impressive leap from \$12 an hour to \$22 an hour. Delegate structures

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/90410800/nivanuaturse-workers-and-marlborough-vineyard-contractor-embroiled-in-contract-dispute>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?id=1&objectid=11766210>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/at-work/four-corners-investigation-reveals-exploitation-and-slave-like-conditions-on-farms-supplying-aussie-supermarkets/news-story/e3264dc44240a65308c226c80e67bb7a>

are consolidating. Nelthorpe says the NUW is on the cusp of winning casual over-time in the industry and is also focused on challenging piece rates.

Nelthorpe says there are three major factors that enable abuse in the horticulture industry. Firstly, the award system; while Australia has a system of industry awards setting minimum wages and conditions, horticulture has the worst award of any industry, for example not requiring overtime pay. Secondly and thirdly, the interlinked issues of cash contracting and insecure working visas.

“Cash contractors in the most seasonal industries, say grapes, strawberries, asparagus, stone fruit citrus, they control the point of entry into the industry to the point that if you want to work in a lot of the sites you have to stay in the contractor’s house, you have to use the contractor’s transport, you have to use the contractor’s preferred unlicensed migration agent to get your visa made,” Nelthorpe explains. “That means that it’s very hard for people who feel bonded to break away from that without really taking serious risks.” In Aotearoa, the Regional Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme similarly keeps migrant workers insecure, along with other bonded working visas.

Nelthorpe is sharply critical of unionists who push a ‘local jobs for local workers’ line. Excluding migrants from the union movement is self-defeating, because:

there’s 1.8 million temporary migrant workers in Australia, which is 10 percent of the workforce, and union density has gone through the floor.

Workers should be able to go where-ever they want to go. Capital can flow so workers should be able to flow as well. And unions should be able to adapt to that and support any worker that wants to join a union.

Crucially, standing for migrant worker rights allows unions to set minimum standards, rather than letting the abuse of a vulnerable workforce drive down conditions for all. “So there’s the self-interest element, but also these are the workers that are picking and packing the food that we eat. And every person has a responsibility to make sure people are treated with respect.”

Despite wages and conditions in the industry being dire by Australian standards, wages are still often better than in migrant workers’ origin countries. For that reason, among others, wages matter, but aren’t the main issue driving organisation in the industry. “Respect is the deeper issue, and being able to have a voice at work.”

explains Nelthorpe.

Organising in an industry with an international workforce also has distinct aspects. Organising must be multilingual, with materials in the first language of members, and a multilingual organising team. Members also bring the political concerns of their communities to the union.

Nelthorpe recalls a 2017 NUW mobilisation against genocide in Myanmar:

Our Rohingya membership in Melbourne were looking to do something in solidarity with their community, and so they turned to the union cause they’ve got no-one else really, and we helped them organize a rally in Collins Street in the city, and to be honest it was the most powerful inspiring rally I’ve ever been to.

About 200 members of the community mobilised, you had NUW flags, the night before the rally we worked with the group at the Trades Hall studio, they made all their own banners, made their own blood-splattered or red paint splattered clothing, and it was just an outpouring of grief for the community. When you think about what a union can be, sometimes we get caught in this narrow wages and conditions prison, and we get caught in the workplace level, but a union’s much more than that, and for these workers, the union was the vehicle through which they could express their grief and anger at what’s happening to their people. That community will always love the union because of that experience, and when they’ve got nowhere else to turn, they turn to the union. So since that rally we’ve had a number of refugee rallies, at which members and organizers of the union have spoken, and they connect the struggle of the union with the struggle against Mandatory Detention, the struggle against a backward racist immigration system, there’s massive opportunities there to break the racial stereotypes, the racial language that’s used to denigrate refugees in this country.

In Aotearoa, FIRST Union members and organizers also take action on international political issues. In 2007, current FIRST Union president Dennis Maga faced potential arrest in his home country of the Philippines for protesting against the president’s visit, a threat that was averted.<sup>6</sup> FIRST’s mobilisation against repression in the Philippines continues to this day,<sup>7</sup> alongside the more recent organisation of migrant farm workers. FIRST in Aotearoa and NUW in Australia show that migrants’ issues are workers’ issues.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO0705/S00563.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <https://filipinosolidarity.wordpress.com/2017/12/31/auckland-philippines-solidarity-in-2017-a-retrospect/>



# RAISE THE BAR!

BRONWEN BEECHEY interviews hospitality worker organizer Chloe-Ann King.

**Can you briefly introduce yourself and why you feel passionate about hospitality workers' rights?**

My name is Chloe Ann-King and I am a writer, workers' rights organizer, community activist and welfare advocate with a strong background in academia and grassroots organising. I've also spent most of my life in low waged work which includes a 15-year stint in the hospo [hospitality] industry. During my time in this industry I endured wage theft, sexual harassment (mostly from customers), insecure shifts, cut shifts with no good faith negotiation and have been fired with absolutely no reason given. For these reasons I became incredibly passionate about hospo rights. No one should go to work and feel unsafe and be paid so poorly you don't have enough money to live on.

**When did you begin your involvement in organising and advocating for hospitality workers?**

I volunteered in unions for years and my mum is a trade unionist, so from a really young age I was interested and passionate about defending workers' rights across the board. I specifically started advocating for hospo workers around 3 years ago and I also began speaking out in the media about our working conditions.

**When was Raise the Bar founded? What was the rationale for its creation?**

Raise the Bar was established about 2 years ago and the rationale behind my decision was that the hospo industry was basically unregulated: consecutive governments had barely enforced employment law in the industry and unions, in general, didn't seem that interested in



protecting the rights of hospo workers. Many trade unionists told me this was because the industry was “too hard to organize and too spread out.” I don’t agree with this sentiment at all.

### **What has been the history of union activity for hospo workers (prior to Raise the Bar)?**

Before Raise the Bar, E tū [*New Zealand’s biggest private sector union*] was meant to be organising and protecting the rights of hospo workers. I was a member of this Union for a while, but it became increasingly clear this union had almost no interest in organising hospo – some of their reps outright told me it just wasn’t an industry that could be organized. E tū was launched in October 2015 with the merging of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, the Service and Food Workers Union and the Flight Attendants and Related Services Union. But in the entire time that I worked in the hospo industry I never once saw a union rep from SFWU set foot into my workplace. I’ve no idea what their reps were doing with their time, but they certainly weren’t doing anything to protect or organize hospo workers in the CBD. Most hospo workers I speak with (especially young ones) have no idea what a union even is.

There are certainly unions such as Unite Union who are doing a really great job of organising service workers at SkyCity and fast food workers but once again all the bars, restaurants and smaller cafes have mostly been left untouched by unions in the last 20 years.

### **What are the main issues facing hospo workers?**

Wage theft is the number one issue we deal with at Raise the Bar, we get email after email from hospo workers who tell us their boss is stealing off them. This theft can include breaks docked that workers never took, underpayment or no payment of wages, bosses refusing to pay holiday pay (8%) or sick leave, and employers making unreasonable deductions from wages when customers walk out and don’t pay.

Other major issues include racism within the industry, ranging from racist hiring practices, like Pākehā hospo employers throwing out CV’s when names appear too “indigenous” for them to pronounce, to customers saying racist things to hospo workers that management don’t do much to mitigate. I’ve witnessed Pākehā hospo employers also exploiting new migrant workers from Asian countries, forcing them to work unpaid

or for well below the minimum wage. I’ve written about such issues for *E-Tangata* which is an online Sunday magazine run by the Mana Trust.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual harassment is also epidemic in the industry, to the point where sexual assault and harassment on shift has been, in my opinion, completely normalised. Hospo Voice, a digital union in Melbourne organising hospo workers, put out a survey that stated 89% of all female hospo workers surveyed had experienced sexual harassment on shift. Imagine going to work and you only had an 11% chance of being safe on shift.

Other major issues include basic employment entitlements such as breaks being constantly denied by duty managers - usually because of pressure and understaffing at the hands of employers. Many hospo workers I speak with will work over 8 hours without adequate meal or tea breaks.

### **Can you give examples of the poor treatment of hospo workers, either from your own experience or people you have advocated for?**

Personally, I’ve been sexually assaulted and harassed on shift more times than I care to remember which has included having my breasts and ass groped, and outright assaults. Five years ago, a customer pushed me into a bathroom stall and shoved his tongue down my throat and started feeling me up. I had to fight my way out. I just continued my shift that night like nothing happened – I needed the money and feared I would be sent home if I told my manager. I still have flashbacks to what that customer did, which is a sign of work-related PTSD.

A lot of hospo employers I’ve worked for have stolen from me, which ranges from them underpaying me, refusing to pay me, docking breaks I never took, refusing to pay 8% sick pay, forcing me to undertake training unpaid... I could go on. I’ve worked 12-hour shifts with maybe one 10-minute break and I’ve even been denied toilet breaks on the odd occasion which, frankly, was pretty humiliating. You really learn about your place in society when you have to beg your boss to take a piss.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://e-tangata.co.nz/reflections/most-times-you-let-it-go/>



**What has been the response of existing unions to your campaigns?**

Recently, mostly negative responses. I've had union men verbally attack me which often boils down to them telling me I need to 'toe the union line' – this has often felt like a low-level threat. And I've had union men undermine the mahi I've been doing in different ways.

Most recently two male union reps contacted two hospo workers/leaders in Raise the Bar who I was organising with against wage theft. These Māori wāhine hospo workers had developed a strong media strategy, among other tactics, to get results with support from Raise the Bar. These Pākehā guys ignored the awesome mahi these hospo workers had done already to organize themselves. They proceeded to talk over these workers and didn't bother to ask what they wanted or what a 'win' looked like to them. This left them feeling spoken over, disempowered and distrusting of unions – it was their very first experience dealing with union reps.

I feel structural issues of sexism and racism are a massive issue within our union movements in Aotearoa/NZ. I eventually stopped showing up to pickets and meetings – I just didn't feel comfortable anymore. I used to love volunteering for unions but now I feel dejected about the movement and how some union reps treat people who propose different models of organising or criticise issues of structural injustice within the movement. There seems to be a really swift clampdown against people who generally want to see new models of organising such as digital organising and bringing back rank and file organising in response to low waged and precarious industries such as hospo.

**What have been some of the successes of Raise the Bar?**

The most recent success is the \$30,000 pay-out we collectively got from Wagamama England. The owner of Wagamama Wellington shut the doors of his business with no notice given to his workers and then put the business into receivership. He refused to pay wages owed and holiday pay amounting to tens of thousands of dollars which left most of his workers significantly out of pocket.

The workers collectively organized with support from me and Raise the Bar, and in under a month we managed to get Wagamama in England to

cough up some of the money as a good will gesture – \$30,000 to be exact. A lot of this was due to the ongoing media pressure the workers and Raise the Bar applied by using a strong media campaign to 'out' Wagamama for wage theft. We also, generally, have weekly wins that include smaller pay-outs to hospo workers in wages owed by bosses refusing to pay. We also have consistently gotten issues such as wage theft in hospo into the media.

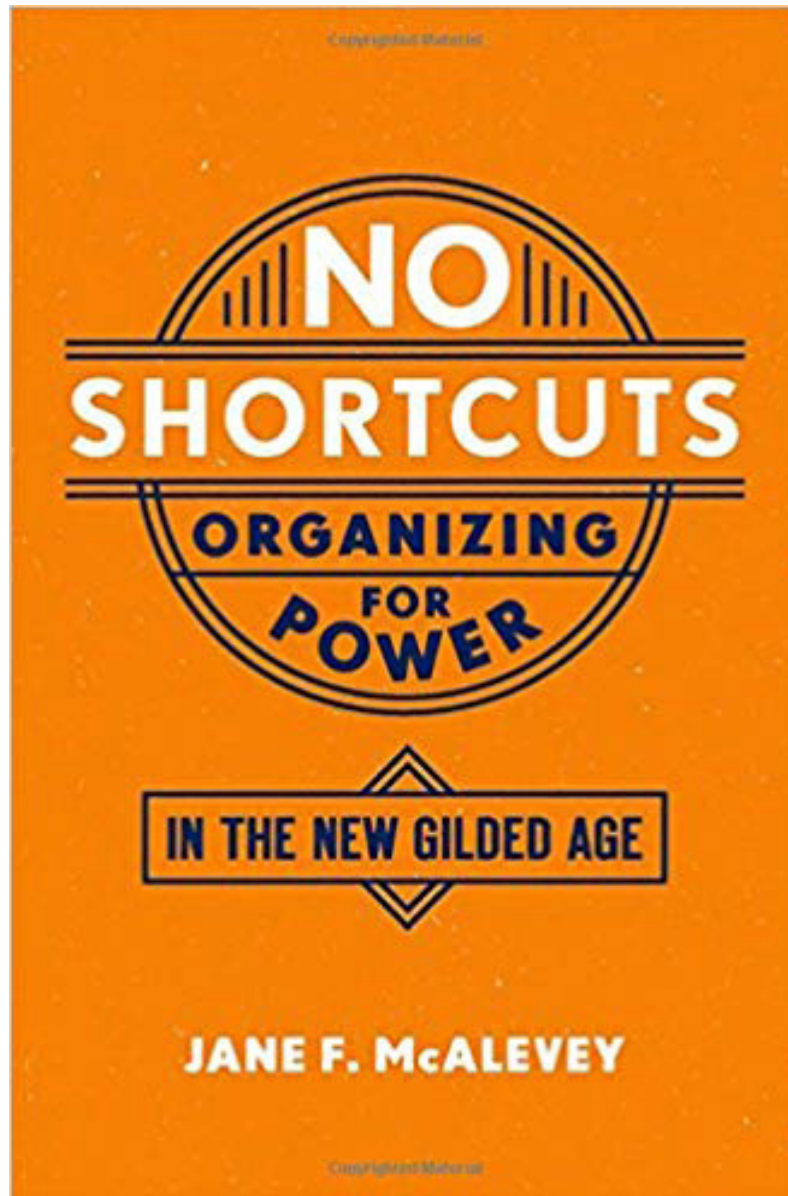
I also give out free legal advice (with support from an employment advocate who is legally trained) to hospo workers on a weekly basis. I count this as an ongoing success because the more hospo workers know their rights and feel empowered to stand up to their employers the more chance we have of structural change within the industry.

**What issues will you campaign on in the next year?**

The main issue we are focused on is wage theft and pushing the government to make wage theft a criminal offence. Right now, it is illegal for a boss to commit wage theft; but it isn't a criminal offence, meaning that the most these employers will face is a fine. Hospo employers are stealing hundreds of thousands off their workers annually and face almost no consequences for their behaviour. Yet, if a hospo worker put their hand in the till and took \$50 bucks they could be up on criminal charges if their employer rang the cops. Personally, I think this is a really clear-cut example of the massive power imbalances within both our workplaces and criminal justice system. Employers are protected but workers are not.

# ORGANISING THE WHOLE WORKER

Review of Jane F. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press)



**Jane F. McAlevey**, a long-time organizer in the environmental and labour movements, comes to this book with a quite ambitious goal – to seek an explanation as to why the workers’ movement has suffered defeat after defeat to the forces of corporate neoliberalism over the last 50 years or so. She sums up her argument:

First, the reason that progressives have experienced a four-decade decline in the United States is because of a significant and long-term

shift away from deep organizing and toward shallow mobilizing. Second, the split between “labor” and “social movement” has hampered what little organizing has been done. Together, these two trends help account for the failure of unions and progressive politics, the ongoing shrinking of the public sphere, and unabashed rule by the worst and greediest corporate interests. Third, different approaches to change lead to different outcomes, often very different outcomes. (Kindle location 140)



Great things were expected from the newer generation of union organizers who took over in the United States' major union federation, the AFL-CIO, after 1995, whom McAlevey refers to as "New Labor". And yet, the long series of defeats has continued over the next two decades (386). What has gone wrong?

McAlevey distinguishes three methods of organising, which she calls the "advocacy", "mobilizing" and "organising" models. The advocacy model is the model which we are familiar with from social movements and NGOs. In this model, a professional group of advocates and campaigners acts *on behalf* of their membership, who are only asked to pay their dues and "help out" with activism organized for them:

Many small advances can be and are won without engaging ordinary people, where the key actors are instead paid lawyers, lobbyists, and public relations professionals, helped by some good smoke and mirrors. That is an advocacy model, and small advances are all it can produce... Advocacy doesn't involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle. (222, 278)

An example of this approach given by McAlevey is that led by America's SEIU union in the 1990s in the nursing home sector. This union went out of their way to build "partnerships" with nursing home bosses, where the union joined forces with the bosses to press state governments for more funding for the sector, and in return the bosses would remove obstacles to the unions organising in (certain, selected) workplaces. The really perverse thing about this is that the union also *actively discouraged struggles by their members* while this was going on:

The employers would select which nursing homes could be unionized during the life of the accord. If workers at nursing homes not selected by the employer... wanted help forming a union, the union would be bound to decline. The union agreed to prohibit the workers from any form of negative messaging or negative campaigning during the life of the agreement" (1524, 1529)

For the union tops, expanding their dues base, by proving to bosses that union membership was "harmless" to their profits and privileges, took priority over the actual needs of their existing members.

The second approach discussed by McAlevey is the "mobilizing" model, in which union full-timers actively encourage workers to campaign and to take strike action in order to win better

deals. However, the mobilizing model attempts to sidestep the difficulties and risks involved in all-out strike action by concentrating on other forms of action, which can be carried out by a dedicated, self-selecting minority of workers, with full-time organizers' help:

Mobilizing is a substantial improvement over advocacy, because it brings large numbers of people to the fight. However, too often they are the same people: dedicated activists who show up over and over at every meeting and rally for all good causes, but without the full mass of their coworkers or community behind them. This is because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staffers see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change... (248)

McAlevey argues strongly that, while the mobilising and even the advocacy models can win reforms for workers from the bosses or from the state, only her third approach, the "organising model" can create real, lasting changes in the lives of workers. This is precisely because it aims to create a majority or super-majority in the workplace, which is the only way in which an all-out strike can be won:

[Organising] places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don't consider themselves activists at all—that's the point of organizing... Since organizing's primary purpose is to change the power structure away from the 1 percent to more like the 90 percent, majorities are always the goal: the more people, the more power. But not just any people. And the word majority isn't a throwaway word on a flip chart, it is a specific objective that must be met. (290, 314)

The "organising" model therefore maps precisely onto those forms of politics which the late Hal Draper called "socialism from below": an insistence that, as Karl Marx said, the liberation of the working class must be the product of working-class self-organisation, not something done "for" them by kindly elites or a "professional revolutionary" minority. She contrasts this with both the advocacy and mobilization models. She links the increasing "professionalisation" of labour activism to the increasing influence of the ideas of the famous (or infamous) community organizer, Saul Alinsky:

Today, corporate campaigns continue to locate the fight in the economic arena by threatening to disrupt profit making, but not through workers withholding their labor. Instead, a new army of college-educated professional union staff bypass the strike and devise other tactics to attack the employer's bottom line. New Labor's overreliance on corporate campaigns has resulted in a war

waged between labor professionals and business elites. Workers are no longer essential to their own liberation... Once the production-crippling strike weapon was abandoned, union leaders no longer saw a need to build a strong worksite-based organization among a majority of workers—one powerful enough that a majority decides to walk off the job, united, together, with common goals. (425, 442)

After 1995, following New Labor's ascent to positions of power in the national AFL-CIO, justified by the Alinsky assertion "Organizers take orders—leaders lead," professional staffing ballooned, with many new positions added—researchers, political campaigners, and communicators. People in these positions have at least as much real power as the organizers, if not more, further diminishing the importance and voice of the real "leaders."

This is why workers, who were once central to labor actions, are now peripheral. The corporate campaign, emulating Alinsky's tactical warfare, led by a small army of college-educated staff, has taken hold as the dominant weapon against corporations. (975, 999)

The greatest damage to our movements today has been the shift in the agent of change from rank-and-file workers and ordinary people to cape-wearing, sword-wielding, swashbuckling staff. To deny that having experienced staff can be the difference between workers winning and losing is ridiculous and counterproductive. Way more counterproductive has been the wholesale elimination of the crucial role of the rank-and-file workers (at work and at home). (3794)

In contrast, McAlevey explains how the core of the organising model involves identifying existing worker-leaders, rather than building on the enthusiasm of volunteers:

Only true organic leaders can lead their coworkers in high-risk actions. Pro-union activists without organic leaders are not effective enough, and professional staff organizers certainly cannot do it (744)

Social-movement organizations (SMOs) ... and now, unfortunately, unions as well, label as a leader just about anyone who enthusiastically shows up at two successive meetings (even one sometimes), making the words activist and leader interchangeable... But in any strategy for building power, all people are not the same. (952)

Crucially, the organizing model also involves community organizing – in the sense that of understanding that working-class people are embedded in neighbourhoods, ethnic or religious communities, sports teams, and other vitally important networks outside of their working lives. Support from these communities is vital for winning any real majority strike, and understanding this is the basis for McAlevey's

blend of the mobilizing and organizing approaches which she calls "whole-worker organizing" (501).

She particularly stresses religious communities, who – according to research – are the major influences on US working-class communities alongside the labour movement (1292). While many union organizers who come from secular middle-class or socialist traditions are wary of getting involved with religion, McAlevey's case studies refer to Catholic priests and Protestant preachers playing vital organizing roles in support of successful struggles involving large numbers of African-American and Latinx workers. Again, large emphasis is placed on developing *existing* networks of power and leadership in working-class communities rather than co-opting self-selecting militants.

Only this form of organization, argues McAlevey, can produce sustainable changes in working people's lives, because what is won is not just concessions from bosses or the state which can be withdrawn at a later date, but real changes in how working-class communities live their lives and understand themselves:

where unions understand their members and unorganized workers to be class actors in their communities, and when the workers systematically bring their own preexisting community networks into their workplace fights, workers still win, and their wins produce a transformational change in consciousness. (510)

If individual actors believe that the purpose of the union is to enable a majority of workers to engage in mass collective struggle—for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their class—then in the related choice point, the role of the workers in the union drive, workers will not be mere symbols of the struggle; they will be central actors in it. If, however, the purpose of the union is only to improve the material condition of workers by increasing the share of company profits they receive, the workers' role will be greatly diminished; they will function as symbolic actors, not central participants, much as they do in today's fast-food "wage" campaigns. (1105)

if the workers don't do the work of building their own union—including preparing for and having a fight—their leadership will not be tested or developed to the level of strength needed for a solid union, one where the rank-and-file workers themselves can govern the workplace after the election victory. (1683)

One interesting consequence of McAlevey's argument turns on its head the received wisdom of a lot of writers on the labour movement: that the decline of manufacturing in the advanced capitalist ("Western") countries and the rise of



service work is a problem for organization. In fact, argues McAlevey, workers in the health, education and social services sectors potentially hold massive power:

these mostly female, multiracial service workers are as capable of building powerful organizations as they are of building a child's mind or rebuilding a patient's body. In fact, they are among the only workers today engaging in production-shuttering strikes. Their organic ties to the broader community form the potential strategic wedge needed to leverage the kind of power American workers haven't had for decades. (581)

When Chicago's teachers struck, it was a total disruption of the "production process," not a merely symbolic action of the kind so common today. Sociologically speaking, the Chicago strike brought a major United States city to a grinding halt. (1683)

Many labor strategists, particularly men, can't see past the need to reorganize the manufacturing sector... They implore labor to focus more on the logistics sectors, which makes perfect sense and should be high on the movement's to-do list. But given the domination of the service economy today, we need a unifying strategic plan for and within the service economy. (3696)

In addition, these "mission-driven" workers, whose profession is care, have a fundamental orientation towards solidarity and collective behavior (3724) and have a social status which helps them mobilise the wider public in support (1858). Even the gender composition of this new workforce can be seen as a bonus for whole-worker organising:

The large numbers of women in today's workforce—saddled with wage work and endless nonwage work—don't separate their lives in the way industrial-era, mostly male workers could, entering one life when they arrived at work and punched in, and another when they punched out. (1312)

McAlevey illustrates her argument with case studies from recent US labour history. She compares different methods of organising in the struggles of nursing home workers in various US states; the successful fight of the Chicago Teachers' Union against a neoliberal Democrat city leadership; a 15-year struggle for union recognition at a North Carolina pork products factory; and "Make the Road New York", a social movement concerned with organising Latinx workers in that city.

If there is a major weakness in this book, it's that it's written entirely from the point of view of the United States. Some of the issues with

US labour laws coming out of the Roosevelt era which McAlevey discusses are relevant only to that country. That said, globalisation continually reduces the differences between nations, and the lessons of the North Carolina meatworkers' struggle about building workers' unity in a deeply ethnically divided workplace (2393), as well as the difficulties of organising workers with uncertain immigration status, are certainly very applicable in our local context.

Honestly, what I would love to see is a similar book to this, written about recent labour struggles in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Our equivalent to the "New Labor" of which McAlevey speaks would be the kind of unionism which has arisen over the last 15 to 20 years, particularly in and around UNITE, but also pushed forward by young organizers in other unions. These new leaders – many of them with history on the revolutionary Left - have rejected the "partnership with employers" narrative and the "service model" (what McAlevey calls the "advocacy" model) which characterised New Zealand's union movement after the defeats of the 1990s.

It would be very interesting to look closely at these new unions, and forms of organising, and ask: do they fit McAlevey's "organising" model, or her "mobilizing" model? Are these new forms of worker organising based on building a super-majority in the workplaces, built around natural worker-leaders, as well as the deep support from working-class communities that can carry out and win indefinite strikes? Or are the real protagonists in these organisations the union full-timers themselves (usually not from working-class communities), who constitute themselves along with a few self-selecting worker militants as a "vanguard" which can successfully carry out symbolic strikes and media campaigns?

The essential message of McAlevey is that, while the mobilising approach can win concessions and reforms, only the organising approach can build real workers' power and actually change the lives of working people and their community. But she also explicitly states that her book is about all organising, not just labour organising, and the problems of "professionalization" of activism leading to the exclusion of ordinary people extends to all the movements for social and ecological justice (373, 792).

It would be good to see the New Zealand labour and social justice movements grapple seriously with the issues she raises.

# WTF IS THE WOMEN'S STRIKE?

Reprinted from <https://womenstrike.org.uk/wtf-is-the-womens-strike/>



The Women's Strike in Britain began with women coming together to explore our visions of the red feminist horizon – what it could look like and how, crucially – how we could get there. The argument that we want to make is that the Women's Strike is not a one-day event set to coincide with International Women's Day each year – it's not an activist campaign or a "women's" project. In Europe and across the world we are witnessing the emergence of an international movement that is experimenting with and struggling for a feminist future. In the last few years we have fought back and we have won – let's just take a moment to acknowledge that last year we have won abortion rights in Ireland. We have fought tooth and nail across the Americas, from US Supreme court nominations of sexual abusers, to abortion rights in Argentina and against fascists candidates and movements in Brazil and recently to a limited degree in the US midterm elections. We are not the first generation, nor will we be the last, to know that women's liberation must be central to all social

movements. We are not asking for our fair share under capitalism, we have zero desire for an equality that promises nothing more than being equal to a wage slave: instead we are seeking to destroy altogether the system that by its very design – divides, harms and exploits us. We already know women's liberation to be at the heart of the struggle. But just so we are clear: there will be no revolution until women's lives and our labour are central to every political question.

In moving towards a red feminist horizon, we continue the work of our feminist mothers and grandmothers in destabilizing ideas of womanhood. We refuse to be divided into good and bad women. We are not interested in reproducing a version of feminism that only makes some women visible, namely those who are white, middle class, cisgender and heterosexual. Nor is there anything stable, inherent or natural about being a woman. As Chandra Mohanty so forcefully argued 35 years



ago, the relationship between “Woman” – a cultural and ideological construction and “women” who are real material subjects of our collective histories is one of the central questions that feminism seeks to act upon.

Each time we strike, each time we assemble, each time we take to the streets – we confront the reactionary and patriarchal ideas of what it means to be a woman today. Like that we are still all considered ‘naturally’ caring, that we all want to be mothers – especially good mothers, that most of the time we are asking for it and the rest of the time we are in need of protection. Our struggles demand the revaluation of care work and emotional labour – sounds complicated but really just boils down to more people who are not working-class women getting involved in the immense amount of work that keeps everyone alive. Every. Single. Day. What it doesn’t mean is hiring a cleaner so your wife or girlfriend finally stops complaining. We urgently need to respect and work alongside young people in creating a future in which they are listened to as people and one that wouldn’t dream of putting kids in solitary confinement at privatised state high schools, or concentration camps in the desert. We need urgent support for people who care for children and we desperately need a plan to care for and offer dignified lives to the older members of our communities. If the last few years have taught us anything it is that as a matter of local, national and international urgency we must combat the structural and systemic forms of violence and exploitation that harm so many women.

Let us also be clear that reducing what it means to be a woman to set of biological characteristics and reproductive capacities and claiming that women’s oppression and exploitation is the direct result of having a certain genital configuration is a specific form of reactionary and misogynist politics that we have no interest in. From decades of black feminist theory we have learnt that universalist claims of what it means to be a woman serve the interests of some women at the expense of others. Such claims actively work against the possibility of meaningful connections and solidarity being forged between members of the working class who experience

womanhood in different ways.

As such we are no longer interested in the faux-debates of whether sex work is ‘real’ work, if the Women’s Strike is a ‘real’ strike, whether the millions of hours we spend caring and cleaning produces ‘real’ value, or if trans women are ‘real’ women. Attempts to undermine the strength of this movement and thump the table about ‘authenticity’ say far more about those that seek to reduce women to our biological functions and confine us into victimhood, than it does about the vibrant and militant tidal wave we are building. By looking to the wealth of knowledge produced by black feminism, transfeminism and sex worker rights movements we know who our sisters are. We know that women of colour, trans women and sex workers have a central role to the play in dismantling the capitalist patriarchal systems of power that oppress us all.

We began the Women’s Strike as we intend to proceed. On the morning of the 8th March 2018 in London we organized a defiant direct action at the Department of Health to demand urgent action on trans healthcare. In the afternoon, over a 1000 people assembled for over four hours in central London, arriving from university picket lines in their hundreds and walking out of their offices, homes and factories. A social reproduction collective of mainly men organized collective childcare and cooked food to feed the whole assembly. We stood in solidarity with our Kurdish sisters, making it clear that we will defend the revolution in Rojava because their liberation is bound up with ours. Later on, we picketed pro-life religious organisations and joined striking cleaners who occupied Topshop to highlight their disgusting treatment of workers.

In the evening we took over the streets of Soho and marched with sex workers who were on strike for the decriminalisation of all forms of sex work. We heard from migrant sex workers who were arrested and humiliated during so-called ‘anti-trafficking’ raids that did nothing for women in the sex industry and everything for property developers. We listened to strippers who are denied basic employment rights. Our evening ended with hundreds of comrades, including sex workers and trans activists, joining the

Picturehouse workers who have been striking and protesting for over a year to demand the living wage and decent working conditions. On March 8th 2018 we exceeded the narrow categories of womanhood forced upon us and make good on our promise to make feminism a threat again.

Returning to the idea that the Women's Strike is not an event but instead a process we want to briefly outline the Women's Strike Assembly's current industrial and political strategy for the sex industry and the establishment of Decrim Now: the national campaign for sex workers' rights that is demanding and – will win – the decriminalisation of sex work and what it means for sex workers to be leading the discussion about sex, violence and workers rights. In the #metoo era it is crucial that we talk from both forms of reproductive work – waged and unwaged. Specifically we have to be attentive to the discomfort of thinking about sex as work even when we don't get paid.

Beginning in June 2018, the Women's Strike Assembly helped to initiate a unionisation drive of workers across Britain sex industry with the grassroots union, United Voices of the World. Because of how current laws and policies criminalise many aspects of sex work, the unionisation campaign is currently focused on organising strippers and dancers in clubs and pubs. Unionisation is the only way that we will be able to get bosses and clients to treat sex workers with the dignity and respect that we all deserve.

We want to unionise the sex industry because we want to build collective power. We are not interested in passing judgement on what type of work people do. We recognize that many women, men and trans people have a diverse range of experiences in the sex industry – good, bad and ugly. The current laws that regulate what workers can and can't do with our bodies and the continued efforts to criminalise our workplaces make it difficult, at times nearly impossible, for workers to organize and unionise. One of the main reasons is that we are not considered to be workers (remind you of anything – say like housewives?). At best we are classified as self-employed (and as such have very few labour

rights) but most of the time we are treated as victims in need of saving and rescue. For the last decade, national governments and local authorities have used concerns about trafficking in the sex industry as a cover to create a hostile environment for migrants in the sex industry. Raids on premises, closure of clubs, arrests and deportations have done next to nothing to address instances of forced and coerced labour in the sex industry. Instead, bosses now have even more power and migrant workers have been forced further underground and into more dangerous and precarious sex work. But. Because of the current criminalisation of the sex industry, unionisation will only get us so far.

We need to demand the full decriminalisation of sex work and changes to the policies regarding sex entertainment venues. We need a union at work and we need to change national legislation that affects our work. The reason we need to do both at the same time is to ensure that decriminalisation is in the interest of workers and not just bosses. Decriminalisation without unionisation means that workers will bear the full force of the market and the changes will be in the interest of bosses.

For too long, a reactionary and conservative vision of women's rights has dominated feminism, especially in relation to the question of sex work and sex workers' rights. Many feminists have been more than happy to allow the police and immigration officials to do their dirty work in trying to "abolish" the sex industry. While at the same time, corporate and so-called 'radical' feminists have had very little to say about the changes to social security benefits, introduction of zero-hour contracts and the housing crisis – all of which have ensured a steady stream of people looking for work in the sex industry. When we talk about the red feminist horizon we are sketching out the kind of feminist future that we want and crucially, how we get there. The red feminist horizon demands that we have full and final say on the meaning of our lives, how we labour and what is done to and with our bodies.

The strategy that we have outlined – which involves the unionisation of feminised workforces, plus public and national campaigns aimed at the nation state and policy, alongside

feminist education and consciousness raising is not only relevant for the sex industry. Think of the question of childcare – currently the childcare workforce is mostly un-unionised, and around 97% women workers. The costs of childcare in Britain is some of the highest in Europe and the question of who does what reproductive work in the home remains central to the gendered division of labour.

In thinking with the red feminist horizon – the task is to conceptualise how a international women's movement can organize antagonistic and militant struggles within the terrain of reproduction.

We want to just end with a few final comments about what is at stake – politically – in transforming politics by placing the conflicts and questions of reproduction at the centre of struggle. By which we mean the conflicts and struggles over what it means to produce and reproduce not only labour power (and the wage relation) but life itself. Without a doubt we have witnessed a 'turn' to the question of social reproduction across significant swathes of the radical left. However, despite this much needed shift in analysis – it is sobering that actually not that much has changed – or perhaps more correctly not nearly enough has changed. Granted we have a few more meetings with childcare and if you're lucky there might be a plate of food at an evening meeting.

The point here is that a lot is at stake when the feminist intervention is packaged up, separated from "real" politics and politely understood as "care. We need to be very clear that these are not 'women's concerns' – of course they are the concerns of many women but the social reproductive base that enables all of politics to even take occur is non-negotiable – it is our ground zero. Some of us remember that while sitting talking with Silvia Federici years ago – there was real anger in her voice as she recalled her frustration that "we wanted so much more than fucking creches".

A similar wave of frustration occurred at the end of 2018 as we watched months of organising work by hundreds of women and non-binary people across the country – brave, courageous

work of building a feminist anti-fascist mobilisation, taking risks, pushing on the boundaries of what could and couldn't happen – building a demonstration that explicitly and publicly set out to confront and disrupt the far-right – both politically by offering a feminist analysis of sexual and racial violence and materially by blocking them in the streets. We watched our organising efforts and moderate success on the day disappear – literally vanish in both the mainstream media accounts and also in the reports by organisations like Stand Up to Racism and the SWP. The irony can be lost on no-one that a feminist politics that demands a revaluation of that which is structurally made invisible and devalued – was literally made invisible – it's like a feminist joke that just keeps on giving. Much like the joke of some men in the left expressing concern about our safety in leading anti-fascist demonstrations. As if we were 'safe' the rest of our lives or that questions of where and with whom we are safe had had only just now caught our attention.

In recent years we have been witnessing militant action and the politics of reproduction meeting each other – in our strikes, in our action and in our assemblies. During the summer of 2018, the Women's Strike Assembly began calling assemblies on the issue of violence – asking ourselves two questions – 1) what violence means and looks like in our everyday lives and struggles. And 2) what an anti-racist and anti-fascist feminist would need to look like. And so many women came and shared their experiences of rape, of sexual harassment, of racism, of transphobia, and equally our frustrations at both anti-fascist organising that has failed to adequately confront the question of misogyny and sexual violence and at feminist movements that has been unable to connect the tidal wave of #metoo anger to the experiences of working class women and girls in town after town after town. Women and girls who have been ignored, neglected and dismissed because they didn't fit neatly into respectable victim narratives.

One of the striking insights to take away from these first few tentative months of feminist anti-fascist organising is that we have been able to link together so many different women's struggles – from Kurdistan, to Brazil, to the



deindustrialised north to our trans sisters right for dignity and liberation. A week after we blocked the fascists in Oct 2018, 8000 women went on strike in Glasgow and you know what – it feels like the same fight. Because it is. This is precisely what the red feminist horizons demands. That our fight against fascism, much like our fight against the endemic nature of sexual violence or our struggle to halt the currently unfolding ecological collapse must put women – our lives and our labour – at the centre of understanding crisis and also at the centre of what it means to win.

There is much to be done. One would have to be a robot to not feel the vulnerability and urgency of our current political moment. But the feminist forces of rebellion and counter-power are growing, and we are doing the work of building the links between different struggles and it should come as no fucking surprise that in country after country – it is the feminist movement that is leading the struggle, because

“Now you have touched the women: you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a boulder; you will be crushed – we will strike and we will win.”

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## **ABOUT FIGHTBACK (AOTEAROA/AUSTRALASIA)**

Fightback is a trans-Tasman socialist media project with a magazine, a website, and other platforms. We believe that a structural analysis is vital in the task of winning a world of equality and plenty for all. Capitalism, our current socio-economic system, is not only exploiting people and planet – but is designed to operate this way. Therefore we advocate a total break with the current system to be replaced by one designed and run collectively based on principles of freedom, mutual aid, and social need.

Fightback is a trans-Tasman organisation, operating in Aotearoa and Australia. In the modern era of free movement across the Tasman, ‘Australasia’ is becoming a reality in a way it has not been since the 19th century. So many New Zealanders (tauwi as well as tangata whenua) now live and work in Australia – and decisions made in one country increasingly impact the other, as the inter-governmental controversy surrounding the Manus Island detention camp shows.

We wish to engage socialists from both sides of the Tasman – in particular, socialists from Aotearoa living and working in Australia – to continue the lines of analysis and directions of organisation which we have been pursuing. Beyond the dogmas of ‘sect Marxism’; beyond national boundaries; towards a genuinely decolonised, democratic, feminist and queer-friendly anti-capitalism.

We recognise that capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa and Australia through colonisation. While we draw substantially on European whakapapa and intellectual traditions, we seek to break the unity of the European colonial project, in favour of collective self-determination and partnership between tangata whenua and tauwi. We recognise that this must be a learning process.

While we draw inspiration and lessons from history, theoretical agreement on past revolutions is not the basis for our unity. Rather, we unify around a common programme for transformation here and now.

## OUR 10-POINT PROGRAMME

**Fightback stands for the following core programme, and for building institutions of grassroots power in the working class and oppressed groups to bring them about:**

1. **Constitutional transformation** based on indigenous self-determination and workers power. Indigenous and worker co-ops to operate as guardians over public resources.
2. **Secure, appropriate and meaningful work** for those who want it, with a shorter working week. The benefit system to be supplemented with a Universal Basic Income, removal of punitive sanctions.
3. **International working-class solidarity.** Close the Detention Centres. Open borders to Australia and Aotearoa, full rights for migrant workers. Recognise Pasefika rights to self-determination, Australia and Aotearoa to contribute to a 'no-strings' development fund for Pacific nations. Opposition to all imperialist ventures and alliances; neither Washington nor Moscow.
4. **No revolution without women's liberation.** Full funding for appropriate, community-driven abuse prevention and survivor support, free access to all reproductive technologies, public responsibility for childcare and other reproductive work. The right to full, safe expression of sexuality and gender identity.
5. **An ecosocialist solution** to climate change. End fossil fuel extraction, expand green technology and public transport, and radically restructure industrial food production.
6. **Freedom of information.** End corporate copyright policies in favour of creative commons. Public support for all media technologies, expansion of affordable broadband internet to the whole country. An end to government spying.
7. **Abolish prisons,** replace with restorative justice and rehabilitation.
8. **Universal right to housing.** Expansion of high-density, high-quality public housing, strict price controls on privately owned houses. Targeted support to end involuntary homelessness.
9. **Fully-funded healthcare** at every level. Move towards health system based on informed consent, remove inequities in accident compensation, opposition to "top-down" efforts to change working people's behaviour.
10. **Fully-funded education** at every level, run by staff and students. Funding for all forms of education and research, enshrining indigenous knowledge as a core part of the curriculum.

*More detail on this programme is available in our pamphlet  
What is Fightback?*



# Also available from

# **Fightback**

*Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism*

## Pamphlets



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